

# Searching for meaning in a disruptive world – Constructing a lexicon of the meanings of meaning

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**Orientation:** Meaning is not a concept whose significance needs to be debated anymore. Rather, the meaning of meaning is a concept that needs more clarity to improve its understanding.

**Research purpose:** In this paper, the construct of meaning is deconstructed to develop a lexicon of the respective meanings of meaning, especially as they apply to the domain of work.

**Motivation for the study:** Descriptions of the various meanings of meaning tend to be lost across many different journal articles and books. More clarity regarding the meanings of meaning and how they compare and relate with each other is essential to promote valid research and influential practice in this field.

**Research approach/design and method:** Theoretical research is conducted through a literature study and the meanings of meaning are determined through theory synthesis and topical analyses.

**Main findings:** Meaning is a multidimensional construct, especially as it applies to the work context. The concept of meaning in life is distinct and should be distinguished from related concepts, such as the meaning of work, meaning at work, meaning in work, and meaningful work.

**Practical/managerial implications:** By clarifying meanings of meaning, the lexicon provides a unique reference work for scholars, and an essential guide for practitioners in the fields of psychology, industrial and organisational psychology, and even psychiatry, who aspire to advance and promote meaningfulness in their work contexts.

**Contribution/value-add:** As far as could be established, this is the first lexicon of the meanings of meaning in one easy-to-use compendium, for accurate comparison and reference.

**Keywords:** meaning; lexicon; meaning in life; meaningful work; meaning at work, meaning in work, meaning through work.

## Introduction

### Purpose of the study

Meaning, as it applies to the workplace, is not a concept whose importance still needs to be motivated (Albrecht et al., 2021; Lysova et al., 2022), but a construct that needs better understanding and clarity (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022). Greater construct clarity regarding the meanings of meaning is essential to promote valid research and to implement impactful practices to advance meaningfulness in the workplace. In this article, the construct of meaning is deconstructed to develop a clear lexicon of the respective meanings of meaning, especially as they apply to the domain of work.

### Current theoretical perspective

There is a pursuit for meaning in the world. People are increasingly facing existential questions about their presence and want to feel that there is a sense of meaning and significance in their lives (Michaelson, 2019). Viktor Frankl (1970, 1984), a prolific author on the topic of meaning, emphasised that the strongest motivational force in humans is a will to meaning. This search for meaning is prevalent even in the direst circumstances. Subsequent to Frankl's work, a huge body of research has shown that meaning is among the most important concerns of human beings (Allan et al., 2020; Steger, 2017, 2020). Indeed, research has shown that having a sense of meaning in one's life is an essential aspect of psychological well-being (Bailey & Madden, 2019; De Klerk, 2005).

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In the modern world, work generally became a central part of people's lives (De Klerk et al., 2006). Indeed, because people spend so much time at work or working, much of life's existential odyssey takes place in the workplace (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). Concerning work and the workplace, research has indicated meaningfulness to be more important to individuals than almost any other aspect, including remuneration, promotion and working conditions (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Pattakos & Dundon, 2017).

Because meaning is apparently something that everyone strives for (Bailey & Madden, 2019; Frankl, 1984; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022), the interest in meaning became a focus in sociology, many areas of psychology, and psychiatry (Park, 2010), spawning different conceptualisations and interpretations. For instance, there is a quest for general meaningfulness and meaning in life, for meaning at the workplace, for meaning in work or through work, and for meaningful work. However, even though these concepts are related, there are important distinctions to consider in the process of researching meaning and when attempting to advance meaningful experiences, especially in the work context.

## Problem statement and preliminary literature study

### The quest for meaning in a disruptive world

People strive for meaningfulness despite adverse contexts (Bailey & Madden, 2019; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022). Indeed, adversity and extreme experiences can even facilitate the search for and experience of meaningfulness (Autin & Allan, 2020; Bastian et al., 2020). Whenever one is confronted with unavoidable adversarial situations, a sense of meaning tends to mitigate their adverse effects (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). Making meaning of one's circumstances is considered essential for adjusting successfully to stressful events (Park, 2010).

The current conditions in the world of work can be experienced as particularly disruptive. One of these conditions is the global health crisis triggered by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which took its toll on mental well-being (Arslan & Allen, 2022). In addition, an increase in virtual work, automation and robotisation is leading to increasing dehumanisation of the workplace and the erosion of a sense of meaningfulness at work (De Klerk et al., 2021; Smids et al., 2020). This dehumanisation is exacerbated by an increasing focus on numbers and an emphasis on high throughput and profit, with talented individuals often required to engage in transactional activities that are not necessarily experienced as meaningful. The uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in the challenges of modern life can be experienced as disruptive and distracting, resulting in many individuals finding it tough to experience meaningfulness (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019).

Research has consistently confirmed that experiencing one's life as meaningful is a crucial factor to alleviate the effects of adverse or disruptive situations on one's sense of well-being

(Arslan & Allen, 2022). Meaning-making builds reliance and helps individuals to overcome other disruptive events (Arslan & Allen, 2022; Bastian et al., 2020). A sense of meaning has been shown to help individuals cope with psychosocial disruptions such as COVID-19 and guide them through uncertain and difficult times (De Jong et al., 2020; Klussman et al., 2021). Finding meaning in a disruptive and disrupted world is a fundamental element to guard against stress and burnout (De Jong et al., 2020; Park & Baumeister, 2017) and mediating the interaction between hardship and well-being (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2020). Having a sense of meaning appears to be an essential element in healthy functioning (Arslan & Allen, 2022), whereas the experience of meaninglessness has consistently shown to correspond with a lack of psychological well-being (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; De Klerk et al., 2006). Indeed, there appears to be an almost 'unlimited potential associated with a meaning-focused discovery process' (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017, p. 48).

The quest for meaning in the work context appears to be especially paramount to professionals and those employees with exceptional competencies and abilities who are highly regarded in terms of capability and performance and are regarded as sought-after talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Martikainen et al., 2021). Although different generations may define meaning in the work context differently and although there are multiple antecedents of meaningfulness, different generations tend to have a similar desire for meaningful work (Allan et al., 2015; Costin & Vignoles, 2020). However, work tends to be especially central in the lives of professional persons, who are also more likely to search for and experience meaning in work than industrial workers do (Allan et al., 2014).

### The multidimensional nature of meaning

Although meaning appears to be a simple concept, there are several different meanings and conceptualisations of meaningfulness that need clarification (Attoe, 2020b; Leontiev, 2013b). The meanings of meaning are related and are often used interchangeably (Allan et al., 2014; Autin & Allan, 2020), yet, they are not the same. Indeed, the terms meaning and meaningfulness are used interchangeably in the literature on both the concepts of meaning in life and meaningful work and are almost uniformly used to describe a life or work that is meaningful (Steger, 2019). Researchers often define and operationalise meaningful work in different ways and use it interchangeably with various terms such as the meaning of work, meaning at work or meaning in work (Dik et al., 2013; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016).

Baumeister and Landau (2018, p. 1) noted: 'Meaning seems to fit the quip that everyone wants it, but nobody knows quite what it is'. For instance, the existential concept of meaning in life should not be equated to the philosophical question: 'What is the meaning of life?' (De Klerk et al., 2006). Although the construct of meaning in life is related with constructs such as the meaning of work, meaning at work, meaning in work and meaningful work, it is not the same and should be

distinguished from them (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). Confusion regarding the meanings of the word 'meaning' easily arises, especially when applied to the work situation (Rosso et al., 2010). As such, meaningful work becomes mistakenly equated with terms which have distinct meanings, without clarification of the respective meanings (Rosso et al., 2010; Yeoman et al., 2019). For instance, Steger et al.'s (2012) work and meaning inventory (WAMI), developed to measure meaningful work, is often used to measure meaning in work (Kar & Elangovan, 2019) or meaning at work is often incorrectly measured (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019; Kashyap & Arora, 2022). The ambiguous use of the different meanings even occurs in authoritative works such as *The Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work* (Yeoman et al., 2019), *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace* (Dik et al., 2013), and *Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning* (Leontiev, 2013b).

## Research objective

The concept of meaning is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a single construct (Leontiev, 2013a). It is challenging to understand or research a phenomenon unless the construct and its dimensions are clearly defined. Indeed, 'it is critically important for the theorist to attempt to strip away the extraneous meaning that has become attached to a construct' (Suddaby, 2010, p. 348), because 'clarity and validity are inseparable' (Yaniv, 2011, p. 590). To resolve the often 'inconsistent and confusing use of the terminology associated with meaningful work' (Albrecht et al., 2021, p. 3), it is paramount to clarify the meanings of meaning from 'well-researched models, theories and frameworks' (p. 3), and provide a clear lexicon for use in both research and practice. The high-level abstraction of meaningfulness has led to diverse interpretations, resulting in the same terms being used to describe related, but distinct concepts—a situation that requires clarification of the constructs (Yaniv, 2011) to ensure research validity (Suddaby, 2010). The objective of this article was to deconstruct the concept of meaning to develop a lexicon of the respective meanings of meaning, especially as they apply to the domain of work.

## Research design

### Research approach and method

The research design was aimed at deconstructing trustworthy, credible and usable interpretations of the meanings of meaning from the body of knowledge (Jaakkola, 2020). The nature of the research design was partly theory synthesis, but mostly constructing a typology paper (Jaakkola, 2020). Theory synthesis research aims to provide conceptual integration across several literature streams to propose an 'enhanced view of a concept by linking previously unconnected ... pieces' (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). Theory synthesis is particularly useful when the available research on a topic is inconsistent and to build coherence (Jaakkola, 2020). Typology research focuses on offering a precise and nuanced comprehension of a concept with fragmented meanings to identify and distinguish key differences (Jaakkola, 2020). In typology research, knowledge of the

concept is accumulated and then organised to explain the respective characteristics of the different meanings of the concept and their relatedness (Jaakkola, 2020).

## Gathering the data

Data were gathered through an extensive literature search, using keywords such as 'meaning', 'meaning in life', 'meaningful', 'meaningful work', 'meaning at work', 'meaning in work', 'meaning through work', and 'meaning of work' to search for the relevant constructs that relate to a sense of meaning. Google Scholar (GS), the scientific database with the largest and most comprehensive coverage (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016; Martín-Martín et al., 2018, 2021), was used to search for literature. Regardless of the many unique sources that GS offers, GS demonstrates high Spearman correlations (0.78–0.99) with Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, the 'titans of bibliographic information' (Pranckutė, 2021, p. 1). Martín-Martín et al. (2018, p. 1160) concluded that 'GS citation data is essentially a superset of WoS and Scopus, with substantial extra coverage'. In addition, GS has the benefit that it also covers sources that are not found on other databases, including books. Indeed, GS has been regarded as 'the best choice in almost all subject areas for those needing the most comprehensive citation counts' (Martín-Martín et al., 2021, p. 902).

Google Scholar search results were reviewed for relevance and relevant articles were downloaded or obtained through the institutional library. Additional publications were also identified from the reference lists of sources found from the GS search. An initial data set of 572 publications were identified through this first search phase. Publications were then analysed and considered for their potential to provide insight into the meanings of meaning (Corley & Gioia, 2011), and to provide richness that could result in novel insights (Colquitt & Zapatha-Phelan, 2007). This step rendered 124 sources that were studied and interpreted in the final analysis to arrive at the findings.

## Analysis of the data

An interpretive process was followed to elicit the most valid interpretations of the data as they related to the respective meanings of meaning. Interpretations were consolidated into claims about the meanings of the respective concepts, validated by grounded evidence (Jaakkola, 2020) to elicit the fundamental meanings of meaning. Three criteria were applied in the analysis to assure the validity of the conceptualisations, namely coherence with fundamental theorisation and research, conceptual accuracy, and the possibility to offer useful and novel insights to scholars and practitioners (Ferreira et al., 2021). In developing the claims, contributions from all the concepts associated with meaning were considered (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011) to develop both synthesis and a clear and worthwhile typology (Jaakkola, 2020). Critical reflexivity, a process of 'continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation' (Berger, 2015), assisted with enhancing trustworthiness of the analyses and findings.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Findings – Deconstructing the meanings of meaning

### Meaning of life

Trying to unravel the meaning of life has concerned philosophers and religious apologists through the ages. The question about the meaning of life led to philosophical conceptualisations and religious judgements about human existence in general (De Klerk, 2005). The meaning of life refers to philosophical perspectives on the mystery of why humans exist at all (Baumeister & Landau, 2018). This question springs from an attempt to resolve perplexing evolutionary and existential imponderables (Bastian et al., 2020), by seeking insights into whether the human race, life in general, and the larger cosmos have any specific or even exalted meanings. Owing to its metaphysical or supernatural nature, the concept of the meaning of life falls outside the natural sciences and is thus beyond the scope of meaning relating to the workplace (De Klerk et al., 2006).

### Meaning in life

In contrast to the term meaning of life, the term meaning in life (or life meaning) is much more personal, precise and definite. Indeed, meaning in life has been measured scientifically for almost 60 years through measures such as the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), Life Regard Index (Battista & Almond, 1973), and Antonovsky's (1993) Sense of Coherence scale. More recent measures include the Meaning in Life measure (Hill et al., 2019) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Hill et al., 2019).

Frankl's (1970, 1984, 1992) definition of meaning in life entails discovering or possessing a reason for one's existence, and an awareness or impression that this existence is meaningful and significant (King & Hicks, 2021). An experience of one's life as meaningful is the subjective impression that one's life is noteworthy and valuable and a sense that one's life and presence matter (Allan et al., 2015; Attoe, 2020a; Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Ward & King, 2017). Every person's life meaning is unique and everyone has to explore and find the specific meaning of their own lives (Frankl, 1970). Meaning in life is experienced when people grasp clarity of who they are, recognise where they belong in the 'world, and identify what they are trying to accomplish with their lives' (Steger et al., 2008, p. 200).

At the core of the concept of meaning in life, lies the notions of meaningfulness and meaning-making (King & Hicks, 2021). Meaningfulness refers to the degree to which people emotionally experience that their lives make sense to them and that they regard the life challenges they face are deserving to commit energy and effort on (Antonovsky, 1993; Frankl, 1984). Meaningfulness involves the degree to which individuals experience significance and value in respect of

who they are and what they do (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016). Meaningfulness is about a state of being which contributes significantly to people's experience that there is meaning and purpose in their lives (Bailey et al., 2019). Meaning-making refers to an active process through which people construe, interpret and comprehend their life experiences to derive meaningfulness or a sense of life meaning (Autin & Allan, 2020). Both meaningfulness and meaning-making are subjective and unique to each individual (Mulahalilović et al., 2021).

Meaning in life contains different dimensions, including coherence, purpose or value, and significance (Edwards & Van Tongeren, 2020; Mulahalilović et al., 2021). Coherence involves the discernment that one's life matters and that there is a broader purpose for one's life (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019; Steger, 2019). Coherence is about making sense of one's life (Martela & Steger, 2016), rendering a sense of comprehensibility of how events fit into a larger context (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). This experience encompasses two dimensions, namely framework and fulfilment (Battista & Almond, 1973; De Klerk et al., 2006). Framework addresses one's capacity for meaning-making – the ability to see one's life in perspective, make sense of it, and to use it to derive a sense of purpose and a coherent set of life goals (Battista & Almond, 1973). Fulfilment refers to the degree that one experiences fulfilling, or having fulfilled one's framework or life goals. An experience of well-being develops through the fulfilment of purposeful life goals and the affirmation that results from having a meaning framework that one can use to comprehend some of the complexities in the world (Battista & Almond, 1973; De Klerk et al., 2006).

Purpose is about an individual's sense of having life direction, striving towards the achievement of aligned life goals, and experiencing a deep sense of fulfilment in pursuing and achieving such goals (Arslan & Allen, 2022; Ward & King, 2017). Purpose places emphasis on directedness and intentionality in one's daily life (King & Hicks, 2021; Smids et al., 2020). Purpose is the vehicle that reveals meaningfulness, connecting individuals' purposeful behaviour and meaningfulness (Smits & Bowden, 2013). Having a clear purpose for one's life results in a sense of significance that is more than just surviving, but 'having made, or being able to make, a difference in the world' (De Klerk, 2005, p. 69).

Significance refers to an experience that one's life represents some sense of worthiness (Martela & Steger, 2016) and making valuable contributions that transcend one's own life and existence (Steger, 2019; Ward & King, 2017). Significance also relates to a perception of making a valuable impact on others or on the world through one's life and activities (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). When one experiences a sense of significance, one appreciates life as being more than just a quest for survival. Rather, a sense of significance results in the experience of being able to make a valuable contribution to the world through one's life (De Klerk et al., 2009). Seeing and experiencing significance in one's life and activities is central to perceiving a life of purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016).

## Meaning and the work context

Because of the centrality of work in people's lives, much of the pursuit for meaning occurs within the work context (Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2014). While financial reasons still form the basis of most employment, working is not only regarded as a necessary part of earning a living, but is regularly associated with purpose and meaning (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). Most individuals are not content with finding meaning only outside the work context; they also want to experience their work as meaningful (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). Indeed, research has indicated that many employees are willing to take a pay cut for work that is more meaningful (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017).

Research has consistently demonstrated that work-related meaningfulness correlates with life meaning and life satisfaction (Allan et al., 2014; Ward & King, 2017), and has demonstrated that the presence of purpose and life meaning is closely related to meaning and purpose in the work environment (Albrecht et al., 2021; Arslan & Allen, 2022; De Klerk et al., 2009). Although work is not always experienced as meaningful (Bailey & Madden, 2019), the extent to which people experience their lives as meaningful is regularly related to the extent to which they experience their work as meaningful (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016; Ward & King, 2017). For instance, when an industrial psychology professional assisted someone to successfully deal with a difficult situation, it is likely to result in an experience of meaningfulness for the professional. This experience is likely to overflow into a sense of life meaning.

A sense of life meaning enables employees to evaluate work positively and is often a precursor for the experience of meaningful work (Klussman et al., 2021). Similarly, work often presents an important source of meaning in many people's lives (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017) and a pathway to finding meaning in life (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). Finding purpose in work provides employees with a sense of life meaning, and work significance stimulates meaningfulness (Smits & Bowden, 2013). However, the terms meaningful work, the meaning of work, meaning at work, and meaning in work are not only distinct from the concept of life meaning, but also each other (Bailey & Madden, 2019; Rosso et al., 2010; Schnell et al., 2013; Steger, 2017). The respective meanings and their differences are discussed in the following sections.

### Meaning of work

The meaning of work is about work as a sociological institution and the meanings attached to aspects such as employment, unemployment, and reasons to continue or stop working (Steger, 2017). Meaning of work represents the sociological role that work takes up in a person's life, encompassing the diverse reasons why people work at all (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021) and the centrality of work to an individual's life (Steger, 2017; Yeoman et al., 2019). Work has become one of the most important domains in people's lives. Many of the psychosocial needs that were historically

met through social structures and rituals in previous societies have now been replaced by the social convention of paid work (De Klerk et al., 2006; Morse & Weiss, 1955). Differences exist in individuals' ideation of the meaning of work because of personal interpretations of what work means or what importance it should be accorded in one's life (Steger et al., 2012). Although work is not always experienced as meaningful (Ward & King, 2017), work can be the embodiment of what makes individuals experiencing their lives as meaningful (King & Hicks, 2021).

The meaning of work has traditionally been measured through measures assessing work involvement (Kanungo, 1982), and work centrality (Meaning of Working [MOW] International Research Team, 1987; Paullay et al., 1994), demonstrating the psychosocial importance of work. For instance, the MOW International Research Team had already found in 1987 that more than 25% of 15000 respondents regarded work as more important than their families, community, religion and leisure. Research consistently provides evidence that most people would continue to work even if they did not need the income from work (Morse & Weiss, 1955; MOW International Research Team, 1987; Pignault & Houssemand, 2021; Ward & King, 2017). Working gives people a feeling of being part of society. It gives them something worthwhile to do, and enables them to have a sense of purpose for their lives (King & Hicks, 2021). Work fulfils various important sociological functions, including financial (earning a living), social (preventing alienation and enabling interaction with others), identity (establishing social position and status) (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021), personal growth (exercising skills and personal development) (Smids et al., 2020), and life meaning (providing significance and purpose) (Ward & King, 2017).

### Meaning at work

Meaning at work relates to individuals' experience at the workplace (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017), and concerns the relationship of individuals with their employers, colleagues and workplaces (Bailey et al., 2019). Because meaning is considered an integral dimension of workplace spirituality (De Klerk, 2005; Van Der Walt & De Klerk, 2014), meaning at work has been measured through instruments such as the spirituality at work measure (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), or items from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Clausen & Borg, 2011). Schnell and Hoffman (2020) developed the ME-Work inventory to measure meaning in work.

A meaningful workplace is the sum of the interactions between organisational and workplace relationships and variables that affect the experience of employees (Steger, 2019). Workers rely on their organisations to assist in answering questions about meaning. Individuals want to be part of and believe in something greater than themselves and inevitably include their work contexts in this pursuit. Finding meaning at work requires that businesses serve as a place where individuals can make sense of life's meanings and

where they can experience meaningfulness (Yeoman et al., 2019). These aspects align with Schnell and Hoffmann's (2020) four facets of meaning at work, namely, coherence, significance, purpose and belonging.

To enable employees to experience meaning at work, organisations need to create work environments characterised by purposeful and meaningful jobs and provide growth opportunities (Clausen & Borg, 2011). Leaders should facilitate cultures, policies, practices and relationships that are experienced as meaningful (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Lysova et al., 2019). When employees identify with the purpose of the organisation, it is likely to create a condition for meaning at work to flourish (Bailey & Madden, 2016). This condition is especially likely if this purpose is focused on a transcending contribution to wider society or the environment.

Meaningful workplaces have been correlated with general employee well-being and loyalty (Clausen & Borg, 2011). In contrast, employers who cannot facilitate work contexts that are experienced as meaningful risk an increase in disengaged employees or even the loss of talent (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022). Indeed, creating an experience of meaning at work is both 'good business and good for business' (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017, p. 46).

### Meaning in work and meaning through work

Meaning in work or through work centres around the potentiality of work to act as a source of life meaning (Allan et al., 2015; Rosso et al., 2010). With work being so central to individuals' existence, their lives often become meaningful through their careers (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021). Finding meaning in one's work may then transform into also experiencing one's life in general as meaningful (Allan et al., 2015). Not all work is equal in terms of how individuals potentially regard it as a source of meaning (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). The main attributes that are likely to create meaning in work include making meaning through one's work and making a contribution for the greater good (Allan et al., 2014; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2012).

If individuals' careers are aligned with their sense of purpose, their labour becomes a manifestation of their life meaning. Indeed, when an occupation coincides with their sense of meaning or purposefulness, it grows into more than just a job; it becomes a calling (Ward & King, 2017):

People with callings find that their work is inseparable from their life. A person with a calling works not for financial gain or career advancement, but instead for the fulfilment that doing the work brings to the individual. (Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020, p. 3)

Regarding one's labour as a calling tends to bring forth a sense of personal meaning because it involves pursuing a higher purpose, which is often deeply embedded in one's sense of life meaning (Lysova et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2013). Indeed, from its close relationship with calling, meaning in work or through work is often measured

through instruments that assess a sense of calling (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015). Because callings often involve contributing to higher social goals that transcend only personal interests (Ward & King, 2017), they tend to promote a sense of life meaning and overlap with meaningful work through the notion of a 'transcendent summons' (Lysova et al., 2019, p. 357).

### Meaningful work

Meaningful work is probably the meaning concept that attracted the most attention in organisational psychology research (Yeoman et al., 2019), resulting in a complex evolution of definitions and measures (Bailey et al., 2019). Hackman and Oldham (1975, p. 162) originally defined meaningful work as the 'degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile'. Research increasingly demonstrates meaningful work to mean different things to different people (Bailey et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2019). That which constitutes meaningful work is subjective and intensely personal (Bissola et al., 2021; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022; Lysova et al., 2022; Smids et al., 2020). Work is meaningful when the individual experiences it as meaningful (Michaelson, 2021) and when it facilitates meaning-making (Allan et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012). Meaningful work thus relates to meaningful experiences, rather than characteristics of the work itself (Allan et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022; Lysova et al., 2022; Steger, 2017). Work that is meaningful for one person could be less meaningful for another (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2022; Michaelson, 2021).

Owing to the individual and subjective experience of meaningfulness, there is no consensus on the attributes that make one's work meaningful (Bailey et al., 2019; Martikainen et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2012; Yeoman et al., 2019). Indeed, 28 different scales were created to measure meaningful work, with various conceptualisations regarding the dimensions of meaningfulness (Bailey et al., 2019), for instance, Steger et al.'s (2012) WAMI. Bailey et al. (2019, p. 99) concluded that meaningful work 'is a complex and multidimensional construct ... [and that] uncertainty remains over which dimensions of meaningfulness should be included and which are most salient.' However, the dimensions of meaning in life, namely significance, purpose and coherence, routinely feature also in the attributes ascribed to meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Steger et al., 2012). With regard to meaningful work, significance refers to one's experience that one's work makes a positive and beneficial contribution to others or society as a whole (Dik et al., 2013). Task significance tends to predict the experience of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2020). Purpose can range from organisational goals that contribute to a higher cause to self-transcending personal goals (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Dik et al., 2013; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020). Coherence refers to the alignment between the work requirements and an individual's

characteristics and life perspectives (Rosso et al., 2010; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020).

Experiencing work as meaningful contributes to realising meaning in one's life (Steger et al., 2012). When individuals experience their daily work as meaningful, this meaningfulness also transcends to the wider context of their life experiences (Bailey & Madden, 2016). Experiencing one's work as meaningful contributes to work acting as a source of meaning and promoting work centrality in one's life (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016). Work that is experienced as meaningful has substantial positive consequences for both individuals and organisations (Allan et al., 2014; Schnell & Hoffmann, 2020; Steger, 2017). Meaningful work is consistently correlated with a host of work and well-being constructs, such as greater life satisfaction and life meaning (Steger et al., 2012), lower levels of anxiety and depression (Steger et al., 2012; Ward & King, 2017), higher job performance and organisational commitment, and more intrinsic motivation (Lysova et al., 2022; Steger et al., 2012). Meaningful work has been correlated with lower withdrawal intentions and absenteeism (Albrecht et al., 2021; Allan et al., 2016; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016), higher job satisfaction, increased engagement (Allan et al., 2019, 2020; Lysova et al., 2019), and motivation at work (Bailey et al., 2019). Meaningful work contributes to positive organisational performance and citizenship behaviour (Albrecht et al., 2021; Ward & King, 2017).

## Discussion

### Outline of the findings: A lexicon of the meanings of meaning

Conceptualisations of the various meanings of the term 'meaning' tend to be fragmented and hidden in many different journal articles and other publications, leading to confusion and making it complicated when trying to conduct valid research or work with any or all of these concepts in practice (Baumeister & Landau, 2018; King & Hicks, 2021; Martela & Steger, 2016). A lexicon was developed to clarify distinctive meanings of the word 'meaning' inside the work context. The lexicon is presented in a diagrammatic format (Figure 1) to also illustrate some of the most likely interrelatedness between meanings.

The respective descriptions in Figure 1 explain the nuances of the meanings of meaning and their differences. The main interrelated pathways that are likely to exist between the meanings are indicated by dotted lines and arrows. The illustrations of interrelatedness indicate some of the relevant and likely relationships indicated by research. In the relationships indicated in Figure 1, there is some sense hierarchy in the lexicon. This hierarchy flows down from top to bottom, with feedback loops going upward, showing a complex system of interrelatedness. This interrelatedness

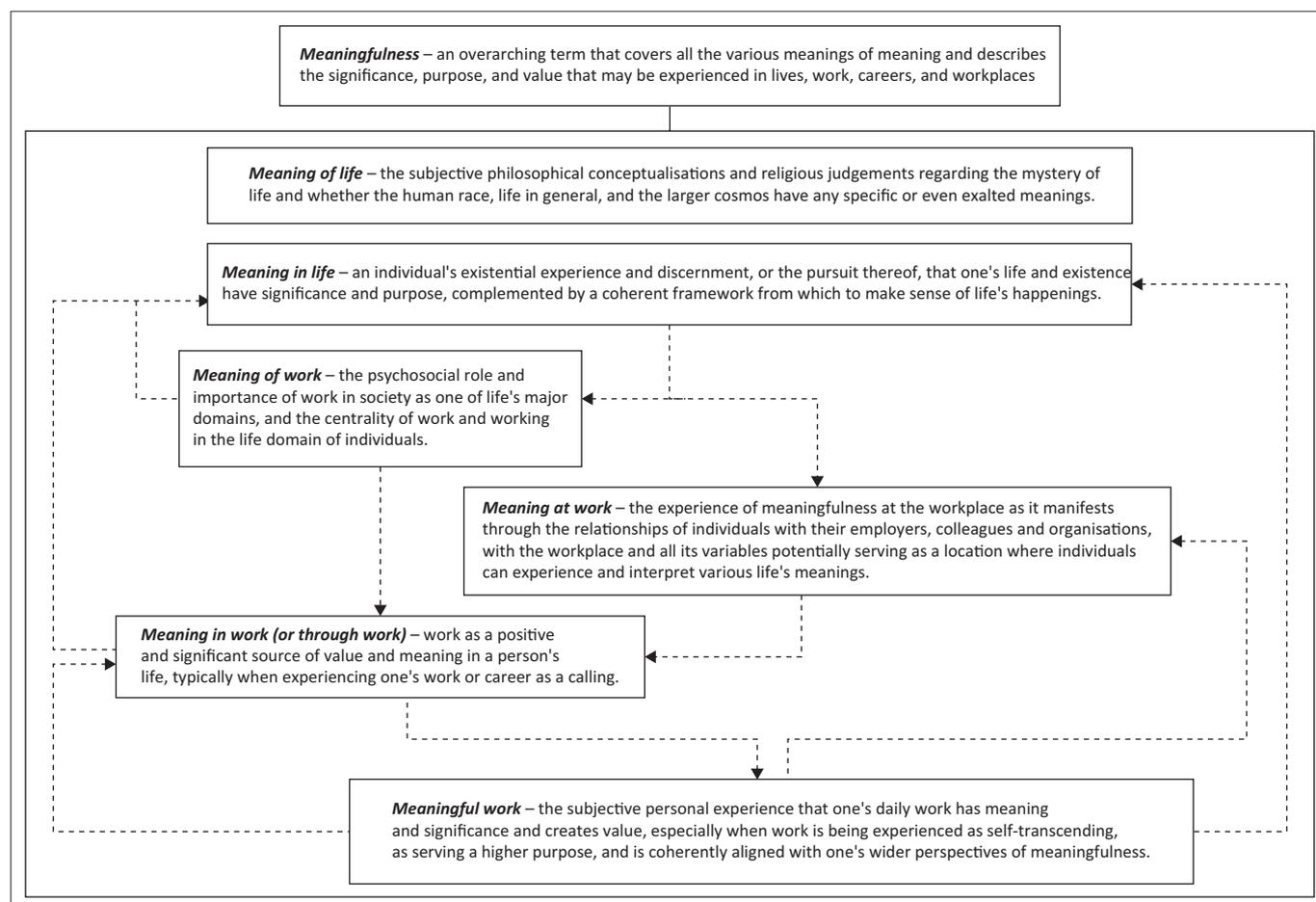


FIGURE 1: Lexicon of the meanings of meaning.

among the concepts in the lexicon demonstrates that the concepts are mostly related to each other, which is probably why the confusion regarding their respective meanings manifested. However, these relationships are neither comprehensive nor definitive, but depend on various situational and personal factors as previously discussed.

## Practical implications

Deconstructing the multidimensional meanings of meaning has important research and practitioner implications. Improved clarity can facilitate many avenues for advancing both research and practice agendas and provide a foundation for making a meaningful difference in the lives of people, the workplace and the world (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017). The lexicon of the meanings of meaning and their interrelatedness, condensed into one compendium in this article, provides a reference work for scholars to conduct coherent, and therefore comparable research on meaning as it applies to the workplace. Researchers and practitioners often get lost in the different meanings of meaning and their work suffers as a result. It is hoped that this lexicon will provide construct clarity to researchers as to exactly which meaning they are focusing on, or should be focusing on. With such clarity, it is anticipated that the lexicon will facilitate research that is focused, specific, reliable and valid (Suddaby, 2010). Similarly, the lexicon offers an essential guide to practitioners who aspire to advance and promote meaningfulness, especially in the work context. As far as could be established, this is the first lexicon of the meanings of meaning in one publication, simplified for easy use, comparison and reference. By providing clarity on the meanings of meaning, this lexicon will elucidate and focus the vast field and opportunities that meaning has for enhancing the experiences of individuals, employees and organisations. It is anticipated that the clarity provided by the lexicon will assist practitioners in identifying and developing effective and focused approaches and interventions to build more meaningful workplaces and create meaningful working experiences.

## Limitations and recommendations

Care was taken to study as much information as possible from the available body of relevant work, especially more recent conceptualisations, and insights from some seminal works. However, the available literature is just too voluminous to permit an exhaustive study and some nuances may have been missed. The lexicon was purposely worded in clear, yet simple language to enhance construct clarity, ease of comparison and ability to serve as a guiding document. This goal would not have been met if overly comprehensive and complicated definitions of the meanings of meaning were used. Once practitioners or scholars have clarity about the differences in the meanings of meaning and select the precise concept they wish to focus on, the comprehensive meanings discussed in the text should be studied, together with the sources consulted in compiling the lexicon.

## Conclusion

Traditional boundaries between family, home life, organisations and community are disappearing as work is becoming more situation-independent through advances in information technology. Disruptions such as COVID-19 and the dehumanisation of the workplace are forcing individuals to reconsider the meaning of work in their lives (De Klerk et al., 2021). Providing construct clarity regarding the meanings of meaning through this lexicon is a vital step to promoting impactful research and practices to advance meaningfulness in a disruptive world that depends so much on the fostering of an enhanced sense of meaningfulness for psychological healing and well-being.

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### Data availability

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